

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of

Lifeline and Link Up Reform and
Modernization

WC Docket No. 11-42

Lifeline and Link Up

WC Docket No. 03-109

Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service

CC Docket No. 96-45

Advancing Broadband Availability Through Digital
Literacy Training

WC Docket No. 12-23

COMMENTS

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I. Summary Of Comments

The Federal Communications Commission recently issued a Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (Rulemaking) covering many topics, including a proposal to Advance Broadband Availability Through Digital Literacy Training.¹ We are pleased to have the opportunity to file Comments on this proposal.

The Intergovernmental Advisory Committee (IAC) exists “to provide guidance to the Commission on issues of importance to state, local and tribal governments, as well as to the Commission.”² Digital Literacy is an important issue for all levels of government because digital illiteracy affects the economic, social, and political wellbeing of us all.

The IAC believes that Digital Literacy training (Training) can be effective in promoting Digital Literacy. Therefore, we strongly support using Universal Service Funds (Funds) to provide Digital Literacy training but only if the Training is paid for in saving in the Fund,³ not from cutbacks in Universal Service program services.

Local and Tribal governments are best positioned to determine the most effective methods for providing Training. We therefore support allowing these governments to define what organizations receive training funds and how those Funds can best be used.

Finally, there is a need for better information on what makes Training programs effective. The agency administering this grant program must insure that the relevant research is conducted and the results disseminated even if this requires using some of the Funds to do this.

II. Introduction

a. The Intergovernmental Advisory Committee’s Interest In This Matter

Since the creation of the Federal Communications Commission in the Communications Act of 1934, it has been widely recognized that local, state, and the federal governments share in the benefits and burdens of communications. The Intergovernmental Advisory Committee (“IAC”) recognizes this joint responsibility. “[F]ormerly known as the Local and State Government Advisory Committee, was created in 1997 to provide guidance to the Commission on issues of importance to state, local and tribal governments, as well as to the Commission. The IAC is composed of 15 elected and appointed officials of municipal, county, state, and tribal governments. The IAC provides ongoing advice and information to the Commission on a broad range of telecommunications issues of interest to state, local and tribal governments, including cable and local franchising, public rights-of-way, facilities siting, universal service, broadband access, barriers to competitive entry, and public safety communications, for which

¹ FCC 12-11.

² FCC Encyclopedia, Intergovernmental Advisory Committee, at: <http://www.fcc.gov/encyclopedia/intergovernmental-advisory-committee>.

³ See Rulemaking at ¶ 433.

the Commission explicitly or inherently shares responsibility or administration with local, county, state or tribal governments.”⁴

“A principal focus of the IAC during its upcoming two-year term will be the implementation of expanded broadband adoption and deployment, pursuant to the FCC’s National Broadband Plan released in March 2010, particularly in unserved and underserved rural areas and Tribal lands. The IAC may also focus on such issues as improved public safety communications, facilities siting, universal service reform, and public rights-of-way.”⁵

b. The Scope Of These Comments

Our comments are limited solely to proposals, issues and questions raised in paragraphs 416 through 447 of the Commission’s Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (Rulemaking). In making these Comments, we have assumed that the Commission has the legal authority to take the proposed actions; we do not take a position on that authority.

The IAC also takes no position on other proposals, issues or questions raised in the Rulemaking.

III. The FCC Should Use Savings In the Universal Service Fund (Fund) To Support Digital Literacy Training But Only If Doing So Would Not Decrease the Services The Fund Currently Provides

There are many definitions of Digital Literacy. When the IAC uses the term Digital Literacy we mean:

The ability of people to access, evaluate, organize, and produce information in multiple forms using digital technologies.

The IAC strongly supports the proposal to use savings in Universal Service Funds (Funds) to support Digital Literacy training (Training) as a way to enhance the value of the Universal Service Program.⁶ Clearly the rate of use and usefulness of the technologies paid for by the Fund will be increased if potential users have the skills needed to use it in ways that address their needs. The Commission states in the Rulemaking: “the Commission established a goal of ensuring the availability of broadband service for low-income Americans.”⁷ An item is available only if it is “of use or service.”⁸ Digital Literacy training can provide potential users the skills to make services paid for by the Fund useful.

The Commission asks “whether funding digital literacy training is an effective way to help close the digital literacy gap?”⁹ We believe this relationship has been clearly established

⁴ FCC Encyclopedia, Intergovernmental Advisory Committee, at: <http://www.fcc.gov/encyclopedia/intergovernmental-advisory-committee>.

⁵ FCC Public Notice DA 11-1862. Released November 4, 2011.

⁶ Rulemaking at ¶423.

⁷ Rulemaking at ¶416.

⁸ Dictionary.com. At: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/availability?s=b>.

⁹ Rulemaking at ¶424.

both by research¹⁰ and by government's funding of Digital Literacy training programs even in these difficult economic times. While some research shows that informal coaching, often one-to-one assistance, was effective with new users,¹¹ it also shows that the strongest drivers for broadband use were concentrated in three areas, employment, education, and government services.¹² This suggested that targeted classes could provide the most value.

The Committee's support for using Universal Service Funds to provide Digital Literacy training is contingent, however. On balance, it would not be beneficial to pay for Digital Literacy training by cutting back on other Universal Service funded programs. Rather, our support is based on the assumption that the Digital Literacy proposals we discuss below be paid for in saving in the Fund,¹³ not cutbacks in the program.

IV. Local Governments, Tribal Governments, and Entities They Designate In Writing Should Be Eligible to Receive Training Funds

The Commission asks for comments "on what types of entities digital literacy training funds?"¹⁴ The Rulemaking lists a number of such potential entities.¹⁵

Restricting the type of entity eligible to receive Funds contradicts the goal of making most effective use of these Funds. Effective training is provided by many types of entities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a wide variety of entities are providing effective Training today. To limit Funds to a specific category of entities, such as schools or libraries, would foreclose the option of providing Funds to entities that are likely to or already providing excellent Training if they are not within the category of approved entities.

If the best entity to provide Training in a specific community varies from community to community basis, local and tribal governments are best positioned to determine what entities those are. Therefore, we recommend that only local governments and tribal governments or entities designated by those governments should be eligible to receive Training Funds.

Some governments may lack the resources to apply for Funds. A state government should be allowed to act as an agent for the local or tribal government but only if it acts on the local or tribal government's behalf. In addition, no one should be authorized to apply for, operate, or take any other step on behalf of a local or tribal government without the government's prior written request by a person authorized to act for that government.

V. The Commission Should Not Limit Funds to Entities or Communalities That Do Not Already Offer Training

¹⁰ E.g., *Broadband Adoption in Low-Income Communities, Version 1.1*. Social Science Research Council. March 2010

¹¹ E.g., *Broadband Adoption in Low-Income Communities, Version 1.1*, p. 42. Social Science Research Council. March 2010

¹² E.g., *Broadband Adoption in Low-Income Communities, Version 1.1*, p. 15. Social Science Research Council. March 2010

¹³ See Rulemaking at ¶ 433.

¹⁴ Rulemaking at ¶428.

¹⁵ Rulemaking at ¶428.

The Commission proposes “to limit funds to entities that do not already offer formal digital literacy training services.”¹⁶ The Commission also seeks comment “on whether we should limit funding only to “communities” that are not already served by digital literacy programs?”¹⁷

We think such a limitation could unintentionally work in opposition to the goals of the proposed program.

Some agencies and communities have already developed excellent Training programs using their own resources. If the best strategy for expanding Digital Literacy in a community is to expand an existing program, we would not want to foreclose that strategy. These entities should be eligible for Funds on an equal basis as entities and communities without Training programs provided the Funds are used to expand their programs, not to replace current funding for these or other programs.

In addition, the Commission’s goal of increasing Digital Literacy may be advanced by providing funds to existing programs to share their best practices. The proposed limitations could unreasonably prevent the agency administering the program from using Funds for doing this.

VI. The Program Should Be Able To Require a Twenty Percent Match if The Match Can Be Provided In-Kind and If The Program Is Not Limited to One Year

The Commission also seeks comments regarding a proposed twenty percent match for grant recipients.¹⁸ The Committee agrees with such a proposal subject to certain conditions. The Committee shares the Commission’s view that a match helps insure that recipients are invested in the success of a program. We believe that a twenty percent match is sufficient for that purpose.

The match requirement will prevent many of the communities that most need the Funds from applying if the match must be made in cash. Therefore, we ask that recipients be allowed to meet the match by providing in-kind goods and services not already used as a match for any other grant program.

Even an in-kind match can be overly burdensome if the payback period is too short. For example, if a community buys a new computer to use with this program expecting to use it for three years and the program of training support ends after one year, the payback period for the computer may be too short. Therefore, we support the requirement of a local match only if the Funding program is established for multiple years. There should not be a match if a one year program is established.

VII. Training Grants Should Be Provided In An Amount Between \$15,000 And \$50,000

¹⁶ Rulemaking at ¶ 430.

¹⁷ Rulemaking at ¶ 430.

¹⁸ Rulemaking at ¶¶ 439-440.

The Rulemaking proposes to provide up to \$10,500 per library or school per year. It bases this number on the finding that \$15,000 per year (\$10,500 plus a 20 percent match) would pay for “approximately eight to 10 hours of digital literacy training per week... at nearly 4,800 entities annually within a \$50 million annual budget.”¹⁹

We believe that the program would benefit from greater funding flexibility. While we do not dispute the Rulemaking’s numbers, we note that a \$15,000 grant would only pay for a few hours of training a week; it would not provide money for computer equipment or software, for publicity, and for other components that may be essential for an effective program.

In addition, many grant programs are burdensome to administer. If the grant amount is too low communities will decline to participate because the extra funds received will be offset by the increase in administrative time required. We believe that grants in amounts ranging from \$15,000 to \$50,000 should be provided.

VIII. All Costs Reasonably Related To Providing The Digital Literacy Training In the Entity’s Grant Proposal Should Be Eligible For Funding Support

The Rulemaking asks the question of what services should be eligible for Funding under a Training program?²⁰ All costs reasonably related to providing the Digital Literacy Training In the entity’s grant proposal should be eligible for Funding support.

As noted above, we believe that communities and entities are best positioned to decide how to provide Training to targeted groups. Limiting eligible costs has the effect of limiting how entities provide that Training. This limitation is unwise. At the same time, an expense should be eligible only if it clearly and logically advances the purposes of the Training. This can be explained in a simple Training budget.

IX. The Agency Administering The Proposed Funding Must Evaluate The Effectiveness Of Training Programs And Disseminate The Best Practices From Those Programs

Committee Members shares the Commission’s desire to spend any Funds in the most effective manner. To this end, Members searched literature and spoke with many experts to locate data driven answers to many of the questions posed in the Rulemaking. We were unable to find answers to many of these questions and have reason to believe that such data does not currently exist. Digital Literacy is too important for us to waste money on ineffective programs in this time of tight government funding. It is essential that we know what does and does not work so funds can be wisely spent. If this proposed program is implemented, the federal agency charged with administering the program must see that this research is conducted even if this means using a small portion of the Funds to do so.

¹⁹ Rulemaking at ¶439.

²⁰ Rulemaking at ¶436.

In addition, the results of this research must be disseminated so that all communities can benefit from this knowledge. The Committee encourages the federal agency charged with administering the program to establish a web site for this purpose and to encourage dialogue among Training programs. Again, the Committee supports using a small portion of the Funds to do this.

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